

PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM

by Dr. Mike Stallard

About ten years ago the development of a new approach within dispensationalism came to the forefront at the Dispensational Study Group of the Evangelical Theological Society (1986). The men leading this new proposal were Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock, both professors at Dallas Theological Seminary at the time (Blaising has since moved to Southern Baptist Theological Seminary). Robert Saucy from the Talbot School of Theology in California also joined them in leading this emphasis. Three books were written or edited by this trio to help explain the new approach: *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church* edited by Blaising and Bock (1992), *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (1993) by Saucy, and *Progressive Dispensationalism* (1993) by Blaising and Bock. This “new dispensationalism” sees itself as an attempt to glean the best of traditional dispensationalism and the best of covenant theology. Saucy’s subtitle declares progressive dispensationalism to be “the interface between dispensational and non-dispensational theology.” The adjective “progressive” became the description of the new teaching because of its emphasis upon the successive stages in the unfolding of God’s progressive kingdom program which includes the present age. This was unlike traditional dispensationalism’s teaching that the present church age is a parenthesis in the overall succession of God’s plan with Israel.

Responses to the new brand of dispensationalism have been mixed. Within the ranks of covenant theology, there are some who welcome the development as the abandonment of dispensational principles. Others respond by noting that the details of a literal future fulfillment of kingdom promises to Israel found in progressive

dispensationalism still constitute dispensationalism and should be avoided. Within the ranks of dispensationalism, some have endorsed the new approach because they believe it to do more justice to biblical continuity than does traditional dispensationalism. Others have viewed it as a minor adjustment, aberration, or fad within the history of dispensationalism. Of course, many traditionalists have rejected progressive dispensationalism because they view it as moving away from basic distinctions outlined in God's Word. In light of the many varied responses to progressive dispensationalism in the midst of much misunderstanding, this article has been written to present, in an evenhanded way, the actual teachings of progressive dispensationalists. It also seeks to respond from a more traditionalist point of view by summarizing some of the concerns which that camp raises in the debate.

A DESCRIPTION OF PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM

The first tenet of progressive dispensationalism is that it rejects an essentialist approach to the definition of dispensationalism. To the progressive there are no core tenets or essential principles which are held by all dispensationalists of all times. The best one can do with a definition of dispensationalism is to assert a descriptive list of concerns which have been common to most modern dispensationalists. One of the reasons that leads progressives to this conclusion is the disagreement over various issues that can be found among dispensationalists throughout history from John Nelson Darby to Charles Ryrie. A list of concerns containing truths like (1) inerrancy of the Bible, (2) premillennialism, (3) the pretribulational rapture of the Church, (4) a literal

future kingdom for national, political, and ethnic Israel, and (5) the universal body of Christ, loosely binds the various dispensationalists together in a common tradition.

This approach to the definition of dispensationalism is different than the more traditional approach given by Charles Ryrie in his important work *Dispensationalism Today* (1965). Ryrie posited three essential principles which distinguish a dispensationalist from a non-dispensationalist:

- Dispensationalism holds to a distinction between Israel and the Church.
- Dispensationalism practices (or should practice) consistent literal interpretation of the Bible. Prophetic passages are to be interpreted like the rest of the Bible following a grammatical-historical approach.
- Dispensationalism teaches that the overall purpose of biblical history is the glory of God, not the salvation of man. This teaching is in opposition to the emphasis in covenant theology on individual redemption. In covenant theology, the focus on individual redemption via the doctrine of election, in the mind of Ryrie, caused the covenant theologian to overlook the elements in God's overall plan which focused on national and community promises with respect to the nation of Israel.

Second, in light of the rejection of Ryrie's essential principles, **progressive dispensationalists do not see literal interpretation of the Bible as part of the debate between dispensationalism and non-dispensationalism**. This was not so fifty years ago. At that time, both sides agreed that literal interpretation was the divisive issue. Dispensationalists contended that prophetic passages, especially in the OT, were to be taken literally at face value. Non-dispensationalists insisted that they had the right to

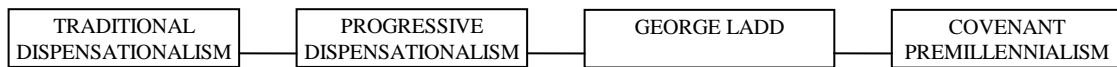
allegorize prophecy. But as the climate of evangelicalism changed over the years along with advanced sophistication of hermeneutical ideas, non-dispensationalists came to believe that they were also practicing literal interpretation in prophetic passages.

Progressive dispensationalists agree with these non-dispensationalists. They believe that both sides practice literal interpretation at the level of exegesis if literal interpretation is to be understood as grammatical-historical interpretation. According to progressives, the differences between competing views, rather than stemming from commitment to certain exegetical rules of interpretation, actually depend upon how one *integrates* various texts from different parts of the Bible.

Third, progressive dispensationalists have developed an approach to integration or synthesis of some biblical texts called complementary hermeneutics.

This concept refers to the fact that some OT promises can be expanded by the NT. However, this expansion is never viewed as replacing or undoing the implications of that OT promise to its original audience, Israel. For example, the Church's participation in the New Covenant taught in the NT can add the Church to the list of recipients of the New Covenant promises made in the OT. However, such participation does not rule out the future fulfillment of the OT New Covenant promises to Israel at the beginning of the Millennium. Thus, the promise can have a **coinciding or overlapping fulfillment** through NT expansions of the promise. Usually the Church is being added to some form of blessing in the present age while Israel still awaits its fulfillment in the age to come. This concept helps form the basis of an "already, not yet" approach to various texts in the Bible.

Traditionalists have often accused progressives of copying the “already, not yet” approach described by George Ladd (*The Gospel of the Kingdom*, 1959). To be sure there are some affinities between the two. Some of the discussions and charts in progressive writings seem to mirror Ladd’s discussion especially as it relates to the present age. However, there are substantial differences between the two presentations. Ladd starts the eschatological kingdom in the Gospels. Progressives start the kingdom with the ascension of Christ. The most significant difference, however, is that Ladd treats the Church as a kind of “New Israel” in his commentary on Revelation. Progressive dispensationalism in no way advocates that the Church replaces Israel as in Ladd and in a more developed way in Covenant Theology (including brands of covenant premillennialism). The relationships between the various camps are probably best described by the diagram below:



Fourth, progressive dispensationalists teach that we are already living in the Messianic Age. Progressive dispensationalists apply the complementary hermeneutic to the Davidic Covenant. Jesus is now ruling from the throne of David at the right hand of God the Father. The eschatological kingdom began with the ascension and exaltation of Christ as indicated in Acts 1 and 2. The Church is the beginning of the fulfillment of the promises made to David in the OT concerning the coming kingdom. The present age is the inauguration of the Davidic kingdom. The millennium will be the consummation of the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant as Israel receives its share of the blessings. It is

this view in progressive dispensationalism that creates most of the reaction by traditionalists.

Fifth, progressive dispensationalists do not consider the doctrine of the pretribulational rapture to have great significance. To borrow Saucy's expression, the timing of the rapture of the Church is not "a determining touchstone of dispensationalism." This does not mean that progressives have abandoned the pretribulational rapture. To this point they hold to it on exegetical grounds. However, they view the whole issue as minor in comparison to traditionalists who often consider it crucial to the outline of God's purposes.

THE CONCERNS OF TRADITIONAL DISPENSATIONALISTS

First, traditional dispensationalists believe that due credit has not been given to continuity in the history of dispensationalism. One indicator of this is that Ryrie's suggestion above for the core of dispensationalism cannot be easily cast aside in all its facets. A French pastor from Geneva named Émile Guers, an early disciple of John Nelson Darby, gave a list of essential principles for interpreting and using the Bible in a book entitled *The Future of Israel* (1856). His list amazingly corresponds to the first two points highlighted by Ryrie. This shows that there is some continuity stretching for over a century in the history of dispensationalism concerning basic principles.

Second, traditional dispensationalists believe that the significance of literal interpretation must be maintained in the debate. As one integrates passages in the Bible, the literal interpretation of a passage can be lost if the interpreter is not careful. It is at this point that Covenant Theology seems to err. When it integrates NT truth with OT

truth, it overrides the grammatical-historical interpretation of OT passages by reading the New back into the Old. This shows that literal interpretation has not diminished as an issue in the debate between dispensationalism and nondispensationalism. The debate concerning it has just become more sophisticated.

Third, traditional dispensationalists raise some concerns about the use of the complementary hermeneutic. First, they reject any attempt to make the “already, not yet” idea (which flows from it) the grid through which the entire Bible is to be interpreted. Most progressives do not do this. However, some writers like C. Marvin Pate, who cautiously supports a pre-trib rapture (*The End of the Age Has Come: The Theology of Paul*, 1995, see p. 234, note 30), take the concept as the interpretive framework for virtually every area of the Apostle Paul’s writings in the NT.

Another more substantial concern which traditional dispensationalists have about the complementary hermeneutic is the potential for subjectivity. How does one know where to draw the lines showing where NT expansions of OT promises take place? In other words, how can a Bible student know how much of the OT promises to Israel should be poured into a NT fulfillment for the Church? The answer which both progressives and traditionalists should give is that the NT text draws the appropriate boundaries. However, many traditionalists want the understanding of how the NT expansion is done to include the meaning of the OT promise. Otherwise, there is a question as to the legitimacy of the NT application as a genuine fulfillment. That is not to say that progressives always err on this point. However, it shows a concern on the part of traditionalists that the way in which the expansion is viewed is paramount in the

discussion. Consequently, the real difference between progressives and traditionalists lies in the exegesis of NT passages which allude to OT texts.

Fourth, the traditional dispensationalists are skeptical of some of the exegetical conclusions given by the progressives with respect to the present reign of Christ on David's throne. For example, there seems to be a heavy dependence upon verbal analogy. By this is meant that various passages are linked by associating words that are common to both passages. In Acts 2:24, the fact that Jesus was "raised up" from the dead is associated with the fact that God promised David in 2 Sam. 7:12 that He would "raise up" from history a descendent to sit on his throne. In spite of the fact that the idea of "raising up" is not equivalent in the passages, the similarity of language is used to link the two passages and justify the pouring of the Davidic Covenant into Acts 2. A second example would be the association of the word "to seat" with respect to the throne of David in Acts 2:30 with "sit" in Acts 2:34 (from Psalm 110) which refers to the ascension throne of Christ. The text does not explicitly make the equation of the two thrones and traditionalists have understood them as distinct. The similarity of language is used to link the two together in the sense of making them identical.

Traditionalists remain unconvinced that such exegetical conclusions really reveal the genuine development of the biblical theme of the Davidic kingdom. They wonder why language such as "receiving the kingdom" given in Luke 19:11-15 is not linked to Dan. 7:13-14 where the Son of Man actually receives the kingdom at the time of the destruction of the little horn or Antichrist, a fact that fits nicely with the idea that the kingdom is inaugurated at the Second Coming of Christ. Of course, there is a large framework of biblical theology within which these issues must be hammered out and

which is beyond the scope of this article. However, all the details point to the fact that differences between the two camps must be resolved at the exegetical level.

Fifth, traditional dispensationalists are concerned that the doctrine of the pre-trib rapture is a negotiable doctrine in progressive circles. Again, this is not to say that progressives have denied the pre-trib position. In fact, the opposite is true. However, they have given little attention to it. Their reticence about the issue has perhaps unintentionally given the impression that they are open to other views. This has led unfairly to claims that their position would collapse into covenant premillennialism. Yet, the concerns of the traditionalists in this area must be handled with sensitivity. The doctrine of the pre-trib rapture and the associated idea of imminency reinforce in the mind of the traditionalist the distinction between Israel and the Church, one of the essential principles he holds. Based on the rapture question as well as other areas of the debate, the traditionalists feel that this distinction has been unduly diminished.

CONCLUSION

The above points have attempted to summarize some of the major features of the new movement known as progressive dispensationalism and to list in summary fashion some of the concerns of more traditional dispensationalists like this present writer. Much dialogue between the two groups needs to take place. Traditionalists need to hear about the significance of the present age which is the focus of progressive dispensationalists. Progressives and others need to hear the traditional contribution of dispensationalism which reminds us that we live today in the light of the coming kingdom. Perhaps in our Baptist circles, with our focus on the local church, we have

already attained a balance between the two. Hopefully, the dialogue will be a friendly discussion about the significant issues that have come to divide the progressives from the traditionalists. As the discussion takes place, let us remember the great tradition that stretches from Darby to Ryrie.